DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 059 010 RE 003 973

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TITLE	Grade Levels and Test Scores: What Do They Mean? Number 2.
INSTITUTION	National Reading Center Foundation, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	71
NOTE	6p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Reading Center, 1776 Massachusetts Ave., N.W., Washington, D. C. 20036 (free)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Parent Counseling; Parent Role; Reading Ability; Reading Diagnosis; *Reading Level; *Reading Tests; *Test Interpretation

ABSTRACT

The idea that some definite designation of a child's reading ability can be gained from a grade level or percentile score on a standardized test is rejected in favor of the idea that such a score is only an estimate of ability. Informal tests in which children read from passages varying in difficulty can give much helpful information to teachers. Variations in test scores, whether formal or informal, may be due to many factors in the child, in the test, or in the procedure used to norm the test. The important thing for parents to know is that reading level scores are merely estimates and are valuable for helping guide instruction, not for labeling children. This brochure is one of a series commissioned by the National Reading Center to help inform all citizens about reading issues and to promote national functional literacy. (MS)

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RE003 973

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GRADE LEVELS AND TEST SCORES:

What Do They Mean?

By Roger Farr
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Let's make the important point first, before going into details: *all* attempts to measure a child's reading ability and progress are only estimates! Because parents are concerned about how well their child is reading, the schools try to give parents a general idea of their child's reading level. Schools report that the child is at a particular reading level, or has achieved a certain test score in reading, but unless you know what this means, it doesn't help much.

Reading grade levels are only approximations of how well a child is learning to read. Grade levels in reading are often compared with a particular set of reading materials the teacher is using or the number and kind of words and ideas the child seems to understand. Often a reading test score is compared with the scores of other children of his same age and grade.

Reading grade levels are quite indefinite. Teachers talk sometimes of "second grade" reading level or "fourth grade" reading level as if these labels represented well defined and widely accepted standards. They do not. Actually, most professionals would have a hard time telling the difference between a book at third grade level and one at fourth grade level, or any other pair of reading levels for that matter.

The child's reading grade level is often said to be that of the book with which he is being taught to read. If he is learning from a reader that is labelled fifth grade level, *he* is labelled fifth grade level, even though all or parts of the reader may be too easy or too hard for him.

How does a reader get identified with a certain grade level? Generally, materials for teaching reading come in sets and are called basal readers. In most of these series each book is written at a greater level of difficulty than the one before it. The level of each basal reader is based on what is called a readability formula which governs the vocabulary used, the length and structure of the sentences, and sometimes the ideas presented. Each reader contains a mixture of easy and harder to read material and receives an appropriate grade label from preprimer to sixth grade, determined by what the average child should be able to read at that grade level. In most cases the child is expected to progress through one grade level—one basal reader—each year. The child who changes schools—and basal readers—often has a problem! A boy reading at fourth grade level, as determined by his reader, in one school, could find himself using a "third grade" reader in the new school because basal readers with the same grade level label may differ in difficulty.

INFORMAL TESTING

Sometimes a teacher will determine a child's reading grade level by having him "try out" his ability on reading materials at different levels of difficulty until she finds a book that most nearly corresponds to his knowledge of words and his understanding of ideas. As a rule of thumb, if he knows 90% of the words or more, and understands at least 75% of the ideas, the material is right for him. If, on the other hand, he understands fewer than 90% of the words and less than 75% of the ideas, the material is probably too difficult. By applying these standards while the child reads aloud or to himself from various levels of a reader or series of readers, the teacher can determine the individual child's approximate reading grade level.

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FORMAL TESTING

Another method that is used to determine reading grade level is to administer a test. The child's score is compared with the scores of many children who have previously taken the test. If the child scores as well as the children who took the same test in the fifth month of the third grade, he is said to be reading at the third grade, fifth month level, shown as 3.5.

Standard published tests used to measure a child's reading ability have many drawbacks and limitations. For one thing, the tests do not measure such real life things as how well he can read the front page of the *New York Times* or the *Boy Scout Handbook*. They show how he compares—in general—to other children taking that test.

The meaning of reading test scores is only useful if their interpretation is careful and knowledgeable. A test score is only an *estimate* of a child's reading ability. This is based on a limited test of specific skills such as matching words with synonyms, answering multiple choice questions after reading a paragraph, or identifying a main idea in a selection.

WHY TEST SCORES CAN VARY

It is very important to consider the conditions under which a child has taken the test. It may have been administered by a stranger whose presence made the child uncomfortable. The testing room may have been badly lighted or uncomfortable in some way. Also, the test was given at a particular moment in a child's life: perhaps he was tired after a week-end trip. Maybe the test was given in the morning to a child who performs better, thinks better, in the afternoon. Similarly, the child might have been tested when all conditions were the very best for him. By altering the tasks to be accomplished on the test, the

conditions under which the test is given, or by testing at a different moment in the child's life, it is probable that the results will be changed.

In any case, and under the best conditions, every standardized test score represents both true ability by the child to perform the reading tasks and a certain amount of error. A child's performance on any given day indicates the *range* of his ability, rather than pinpointing it with a degree of exactness. The child who scores a grade score of 5.0 on any test should be thought of as having skills that score most of the time somewhere between 4.5 and 5.5.

Various reading tests have much in common, but there are important differences, too. For example, some tests stress speed in completing a section, while on others time is not emphasized and all the children, even the ones who work slowly, can usually complete the work.

A child's test score on a standardized test is found by comparing it with what is called the "established norm." This norm is the average test scores for children of the same age and grade level taken from a large group with whom the test has been tried out. If the child to be tested is not like the children in this "try out" group, comparative results of the test will not be valid.

The manuals which accompany most reading tests describe the try out, or norm, group. In some tests, the group has been selected to represent, by percentage, the national population in terms of race, economic and social status, type of community and geographic community lived in. In other tests, the norm group has been selected from particular types of communities, such as large cities. One useful try out group for interpreting a child's test score is a group of children drawn from the community where the child himself lives. Such "local norm" groups, are often developed by individual school systems. In any

case, if the norm group for a test is not described, it is not possible to interpret the test score fairly and properly.

A word about the two most common types of scores. They are grade scores and percentiles. A grade score, read as 5.0 or 3.1, is determined by the scores of children in the norm group at the beginning of fifth grade, or after one month of school in the third grade. Grade scores do not show what reading tasks the children are able to perform, but merely how the child compares to other children on that particular test.

The other type of score is known as a percentile rating, and compares the score achieved by a child on a test with those of the children in the norm group in a different way: in terms of the percentage of children who scored above or below the child who has been tested. For example, a percentile score of 50 would mean that the child scored as high or higher than fifty percent of the children in the norm group; it would also mean that he scored lower than forty-nine percent of the children in the norm group.

We return then to the point from which we started: all methods of measuring a child's reading achievement and ability are only estimates, and the methods of reporting them are limited and relative. They are not absolute and precise scores. They are indicators of the approximate reading level of the child. They should be used as a guide to help plan the next steps in reading instruction.

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The resources of ERIC/CRIER (Clearinghouse on Reading) Indiana University, were used in the preparation of this paper.

This publication is one of a series commissioned by the National Reading Center to help inform all citizens about reading issues and to promote national functional literacy.

The Center is supported by a grant from the U.S. Office of Education.

7-71-10K

GPO 919-371